

**Opening Statement by Tim O'Connor to Joint Oireachtas Committee on the
Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, 26 May 2022**

A Chathaoirligh and Members

I am honoured to have been asked to appear before this Committee as part of hearings you are holding in preparing a Report to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

Introduction

My name is Tim O'Connor and I was a senior official in the Irish Government Team that participated in the Multi-Party Negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) of 10 April 1998.

A brief bit of personal background. I am from Killeedy in West Limerick and joined the Civil Service in July 1974. I served in three Government Offices during my Civil Service career – the Civil Service and Local Appointments Commission from 1974 to 1979; the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) from 1979 until 2007; and the Office of the President, where I was Secretary General to President McAleese, from 2007 to 2010. After almost 37 years of public service, I took early retirement in 2010, and in the 12 years since then have been combining a small advisory business with voluntary work. I was assigned for the first time to the Anglo-Irish Division (as it was then called) of the DFA in the Summer of 1986. This began a direct involvement with the Northern Ireland Peace Process which has continued to this day, almost 36 years later – even though retired from DFA, I was appointed in 2017 by the Irish Government as their nominee on the Independent Reporting Commission on Paramilitarism (the IRC), a role I still hold.

In this Opening Statement what I am setting out is my personal perspective on the GFA Negotiations – “what I saw and observed”, as it were. I am not speaking therefore in an official capacity and the views expressed are my own. You will be getting other testimony from others and between them all hopefully you will be able to put a comprehensive picture together. As an official working in the Irish Government Delegation during the GFA Talks Process, I was not by any means present for every meaningful conversation and meeting, but was “in the room” for a significant part of the time and, of course, was part of the strategy sessions between the officials of the British and Irish Governments, which were a key facet of the overall Talks Process. In my account I have also sought to contextualise some of the dimensions of the Talks Process as I saw them, and added some personal comments. In other

words, certainly not a complete picture from me but one that is nonetheless hopefully still of value to you as one participant's account and perspective.

Context Early Autumn 1997

By early Autumn of 1997, the Multi-Party Negotiations were fully underway at Stormont and in October of that year, I was asked by then Head of the Anglo-Irish Division, the legendary and sadly now late Dermot Gallagher, to return to the Division to support him with the Talks Process. *[I wish to take a moment to acknowledge my personal debt to Dermot Gallagher. I have just called him "legendary" but that does not do him justice. He was an extraordinary public servant who worked might and main in the cause of getting an Agreement and in the cause of peace. For me personally, he was also a tremendous Boss and mentor for over 20 years. He died in January 2017 and his spirit will always live on for me.]*

If I could briefly paint a picture of where matters stood at that point in October 1997. Multi-Party Talks, chaired by Senator George Mitchell, supported by Co-Chairs John de Chastelain and Harri Holkeri, had been underway since the Summer of 1996. As the IRA Ceasefire had broken down in February 1996, Sinn Féin were not part of those Talks. In the Spring and early Summer of 1997 there were changes of Government in both London and Dublin, with the election in May of Tony Blair as the British Prime Minister and in June Bertie Ahern as Taoiseach. The IRA Ceasefire was restored in July 1997, and in September a new phase of the Talks Process commenced at Stormont, involving the two Governments, both major Nationalist parties, the SDLP and Sinn Féin, and on the Unionist side the UUP (then the largest Unionist party) and the Loyalist parties the PUP and the UDP. The Alliance Party and the Women's Coalition were also represented. The DUP left the Talks Process when Sinn Féin joined.

Centrality of two Governments working collectively

The two Governments were key drivers of the Talks Process. The British Government Delegation was led by Tony Blair, supported at Ministerial level by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, and by Minister of State Paul Murphy. The senior officials most directly involved on the British side were Jonathan Powell, Chief of Staff of the PM, John Holmes, Principal Private Secretary to the PM, Head of Press Alastair Campbell and at the Northern Ireland Office (the NIO), Bill Jeffries and Jonathan Stephens.

The Irish Government Delegation was led by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, supported by Minister for Foreign Affairs David Andrews, Minister for Justice John O'Donoghue, Minister of State Liz O'Donnell and Attorney General David Byrne. At official level, the three most senior people were Paddy Teahon (Secretary General D/Taoiseach), Tim Dalton (Secretary General D/Justice) and Dermot Gallagher (Second Secretary and Head of Anglo-Irish Division DFA). A key supporting role was played by Dr Martin Mansergh (Special Adviser to Taoiseach). I was part of the next level group of officials supporting Dermot, Paddy and Tim in their support of the Taoiseach and Ministers. My official title was Head of the DFA Drafting Team, but there was a flat division of labour between a range of us, including David Cooney (Head of Political Section, Anglo-Irish Division), Rory Montgomery, Ray Bassett, Eamonn

McKee, Gerry Staunton and a number of others. We worked closely with our colleagues in D/Taoiseach (including Wally Kirwan), D/Justice and the AG's Office.

The two Government Delegations also received valuable support from the British Irish Secretariat based in Maryfield and led by David Donoghue (Irish Joint Secretary) and Peter Bell (British Joint Secretary).

Each of the political parties had large Delegations of their own and for the duration of the Talks we were all assigned offices in Castle Buildings in the Stormont Estate (just down the road from the iconic Parliament Buildings). Occasionally the Talks moved to Dublin and London, but the centre of gravity was at Stormont.

From the Autumn of 1997 onwards the pace of the Talks intensified greatly. The structure comprised Plenary Sessions involving all Delegations chaired by George Mitchell and a whole range of bilateral meetings between the two Governments and individual parties. The Agenda was set by George Mitchell, who played a masterful and pivotal role throughout, and covered a comprehensive range of topics which came to be reflected in the document finally agreed in April 1998.

A word about the importance of the joint working of the two Governments. I cannot stress enough how critical that was, with the two Heads of Government, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, leading by example. Most of the engagement by the two Governments with the parties occurred jointly, with Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern sitting side by side in the discussions, emphasising both the closeness of the relationship and the singularity of purpose between them. I cannot speak highly enough of their contributions, both individually and especially collectively. They were strongly supported by their respective Ministerial Teams. As officials we took our cue from that, and the two Government Delegations worked hand in glove together through the Process. That did not mean that we were aligned every day on every issue – there were certainly differences of view and emphases between London and Dublin from time to time – but both sides knew, at political and officials levels, that it was only by the tightest partnership together that the hugely difficult issues involved could be addressed and resolved.

Strategic Approach of the two Governments

A word about the strategy of the two Governments in approaching the Talks. The view was that this was a once in a generation chance to secure peace. The stakes were high as the sense was that if these Talks broke down violence could well resume, except now it would be worse as politics would have been seen to have been tried and failed. There was a deep determination on the part of the two Governments, therefore – and this was very much shared by the parties – that no stone should be left unturned in trying to secure an Agreement.

A key factor of the approach of the two Governments was that these Talks, while building on previous efforts such as Sunningdale and the Anglo Irish Agreement, were different also in some critical ways.

For starters they were inclusive – the participants included most of the parties to the conflict and not just the two Governments and that meant there that any outcome agreed in them was more likely to stick.

Another big difference was that the Agenda was comprehensive. All of the contentious issues in play were on the table – from Constitutional questions, to power-sharing, to cross-border relationships, to East-West relations, to weapons, to prisoners, to reform of policing and justice, to equality and rights issues and so on.

A further unique part of the structure of the Talks was that it was agreed at an early point that the outcome of them would be put to a vote of the people North and South on the island of Ireland in simultaneous Referenda. This was an idea of the late, great John Hume – another giant of our Peace Process and I take this opportunity to salute him. His analysis, painstakingly developed over many years, about this being a conflict about people not territory, about accommodation not partisan point-scoring, was at the heart of the Agreement that emerged.

Personal Note Seamus Mallon

While I am speaking about giants, and this is a moment for me about the record, I also want to make a personal comment about one other person who was both a critical leader within the Talks and a personal friend of mine, and that is Seamus Mallon. If John Hume provided the intellectual heft under-pinning the Agreement, Seamus Mallon expressed its heart – the need as human beings to rise beyond history and find a way to share Northern Ireland and this island together. I had the privilege of working much later with Seamus on his memorable memoir, published months before his death in January 2020, and it was no accident that it was entitled “Shared Home Place”. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the giant contribution of Seamus Mallon, alongside his great friend John Hume, to the miraculous outcome that was Good Friday 1998.

It took a Village

I know you may be starting to ask “and what about the others?!” And it is a fair question. Sometimes I get asked “who was the most important person in bringing about the Good Friday Agreement”? I always answer by saying gently that is the wrong question. The truth is that many hands went into making that Agreement and at different points, different leaders were pivotal and without their contribution at that moment there would have been no Agreement. That is the secret of the Good Friday Agreement. If I have to name names then at different points hugely influential contributions were made by George Mitchell, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair and their Ministers; David Trimble, John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, John Alderdice, Monica McWilliams, David Ervine, David McAdams and Gary McMichael. Don’t get me wrong – tremendous contributions and inputs were made by a host of others also within the parties and, modesty aside, on the part of us officials. For instance, I truly believe that there would have been much less chance of an Agreement without the herculean efforts of those three key Irish officials – Dermot Gallagher, Paddy Teahan and Tim Dalton.

But you see the point – there was a village involved – a large one – in getting this Agreement done and my sense as well is we were dealing with a moment in time where a whole range of

factors and personalities came together, where stars aligned as it were, in a way that rarely repeats itself.

Outer Circles of Support

There were also important contributions from people from “outside the village – what I would call the "Outer Circles of Support". I want to mention two in particular - Irish America/the US and the EU. Both of these circles made important contributions to the process that led to the GFA even though not formally involved in the negotiations. For instance, the interventions of President Clinton were crucial at different points, particularly in the closing days. There was important input also along the way by leading figures in Irish America, especially in the build up to the Talks Process, including from Senator Ted Kennedy, his sister Jean Kennedy Smith (who was US Ambassador in Dublin at the time), Congressman Bruce Morrison, Niall O'Dowd, Bill Flynn and a number of others. The EU, both in terms of the Member States and the Commission, played an important role in encouraging agreement in the Talks, including through the promise of financial support, which subsequently took the form of the Peace Programme. During the negotiations on the new institutions, we also drew on the European experience (eg the North/South Ministerial Council being analogous to the EU Council of Ministers). And of course there was the moral force of the EU as a model for conflict resolution more broadly.

Key Issues covered by the Agreement

Turning to the putting together of the text of the Agreement: the process by which that was done was not a linear one. I would characterise it more as a series of baskets of issues that were being worked on in parallel and which came together in the end. The key baskets were as follows:

- **Constitutional issues** - in effect coming to an agreement on a new definition of the Constitutional status of Northern Ireland and how it related to the rest of the island of Ireland and the rest of the UK. Key design features in this basket were the principle of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland in the context of self-determination being a matter for the people of the island of Ireland alone, and the principle that whichever Government held sovereignty over Northern Ireland based on consent, that sovereignty would be exercised with **rigorous impartiality** as between the two main traditions there in terms of their identity, ethos and aspirations.
- **New institutions covering the three sets of relationships** - it was agreed from the outset to deal with the totality of relationships involved in three Strands, Strand One covering relations within Northern Ireland, Strand Two covering relations between North and South on the island of Ireland and Strand Three covering relations between Ireland and Britain. Innovative new institutions were developed and agreed across the three Strands, a major part of the Agreement.
- **A range of key issues arising from the conflict** - in particular dealing with weapons (Decommissioning) and with prisoners associated with the conflict.

- **Reform of Policing and Justice, and security issues** - eg the establishment of what became the Patten Commission on Policing and reform of the Administration of Justice.

- **A range of measures under Rights, Safeguards and Equality of Opportunity** – This Section contained important Human Rights provisions for both parts of Ireland, significant material on victims of violence (Monica McWilliams and the Women’s Coalition played an key role in ensuring the inclusion of the latter) and paragraphs on economic, social and cultural issues.

- **Validation and Review** - this was where the dual Referendum idea was located, together with the concept of a Review where difficulties arose with implementation of any aspect of the Agreement.

Special Handling of two Contentious Issues

It is worth noting that in respect of two major issues of contention in the Talks - North/South co-operation and policing reform - it was agreed to devolve the working out of the detail in each case to a further process of negotiation post the Agreement. The Agreement sets out the principles involved in each case. Looking back on it, my sense is a bet was made that if people agreed on the principles they would not break subsequently on the details. It was a big gamble at the time, but it paid off. My own view is that the conditions did not exist in the Talks themselves to enable agreement on the detail on these hugely contentious issues at the time, and that devolving that to future work was a wise move. Agreement was subsequently reached on the detail of both.

Conclusion

The dramatic nature of the final week of the negotiations is a story in itself and I am happy to elaborate on that during the session, but I wanted in my Opening Statement to set out in a high level overview what was involved in terms of the essence of the Agreement and the thinking behind it.

Second lastly, I wished to draw attention to the fact that there were technically TWO Agreements on Good Friday 1998 – that reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations between the two Governments and the parties, and secondly exclusively one between the two Governments. The latter in effect was a re-setting out by the two Governments of the commitments they had made in the Multi-Party Negotiations, particularly around Constitutional Issues and formally signed on Good Friday by Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern. By the way, technically this was the only document signed that day – the other Agreement was assented to verbally by the leaders of each Delegation in response to the request at the final Plenary Session of Chairman George Mitchell. Collectively the two documents came to be termed “The Good Friday Agreement”.

As a final comment I would say that the main purpose of the Agreement was to stop the violence and create the conditions for a new era of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and indeed within and between the two islands. I think any fair-minded verdict would conclude that it succeeded in stopping the violence, certainly in terms of scale. That was a

huge achievement in itself. However, it is also clear almost 25 years later that the goal of fully embedding peace, and certainly ensuring widespread reconciliation, remains a work in progress.

I have run out of time in terms of my opening statement but I am very happy to elaborate on all of this and much more during the session itself.

Thank you again Cathaoirleach and colleagues for this opportunity to be part of your very important task in exploring the Good Friday Agreement of 10 April 1998.